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Consequences of miscalculation

Intelligence Assessment in the Peloponnesian War

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Seer of misery! Never a word that works to my advantage! Always misery warms your heart, your prophecies—never a word of profit said or brought to pass.

> *Agamemnon speaking to his intelligence officer Calchas in* The Illiad, *by Homer.*

The consolidation of responsibility for the collection and analysis of foreign intelligence—political, military, and economic—in a distinct government organization is a fairly recent innovation. Often, the consolidation is the byproduct of some national disaster that could have been avoided—some commission concludes—if only all the pertinent information had been available to one organization responsible for assessing its significance to the national interest. Over time, however, the memory of the disaster fades and the more traditional government bodies begin to resent the new organization and to question the necessity for an organization that duplicates functions they could better perform themselves. In the interest of efficiency, pressure builds to pare back the responsibilities of this consolidated organization and recreate the old order that existed before the dimly remembered disaster.

Donald Kagan of Yale University, in the first comprehensive reassessment of the Peloponnesian War since the turn of the century, makes a compelling case that the tragedy of classical Greek civilization was an avoidable disaster. The war, Kagan argues, was caused by political leaders who made "bad decisions in difficult circumstances" and not by inevitable historical forces as Thucydides argued. Kagan shows how flawed assessments of their opponent's intentions led to bad decisions that contributed to the outbreak of war and then hindered efforts to shape an effective strategy either to prosecute the war or to negotiate a stable peace.

The Peloponnesian War frequently marks the starting point for the study of the relationship between politics and strategy. Kagan's work, however, shows that the war is also a good starting point for the study of the relationship between intelligence assessment and the formulation of policy. Kagan reconstructs the circumstances surrounding the key political decisions involved in the war to challenge the conventional wisdom on the Peloponnesian War and to argue for alternative courses of action that could have been pursued if the available information had only been seen a bit differently.

Athens Versus Sparta

In Kagan's view, the political analyses underlying the decisions that led to the Peloponnesian War were based on false historical analogs that ignored information that did not fit the selected pattern. Thucydides, for example, explained the origins of the Peloponnesian War as, "The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon, made war *inevitable*." This is accurate, according to Kagan, if applied to the first Peloponnesian War fought from 460 to 445 BC but not to the later war that crippled Greek civilization.

The formation of the Athenian-led Delian League in 478 and 477 BC to prosecute a war of revenge against Persia confirmed Athens as a power of the first rank and as a rival to Sparta for leadership of the Greek world. Influential political figures in Sparta began to see the evolution of the Delian League into the Athenian Empire as a threat to Sparta's hold on the Peloponnese. Athens's expanding political role began to generate tensions because midcentury Sparta was not prepared to share hegemony in the Greek world, while Athens was not prepared to check its ambitions to placate Sparta. Eventually, the political tensions in the evolving relationship between the two powers led to war.

In Kagan's view, the Thirty-Years' Peace that ended the first Peloponnesian War established a new political structure for the Greek world. Reflecting the new balance of power, this treaty implicitly divided the Greek world into two blocs with Athens abandoning all holdings in the Peloponnese. In return, Sparta granted de facto recognition of the Aegean-based Athenian Empire. To stabilize political relations, the treaty prohibited existing members of each alliance from changing sides. Athens also negotiated a treaty with the Persian Empire in 449 BC under which Persia recognized Athenian hegemony in the Aegean while Athens agreed to halt military operations against Persian territory.

The Athenian Empire was now an established fact and, Kagan argues, neither Athenian nor Spartan interests preordained another resort to war. Athens was secure, provided it maintained control of the empire whose economic strength underwrote the Athenian navy as the dominant force in the Aegean. The Athenian navy secured Athens's food supplies from the Crimea, ensured Persian behavior, and enforced imperial discipline among island and coastal states that might be tempted—given the decline in Persian power—to give domestic expenditures priority over the finance of the empire.

Sparta was secure, provided it maintained the legendary army that enforced Spartan hegemony in the Peloponnese and ensured that Athenian ambitions remained limited to the maritime realm. According to Kagan, the Thirty-Years' Peace clearly defined Athenian and Spartan vital interests and established the basis for a stable relationship between the respective alliances.

The Outbreak of War

The second Peloponnesian War, Kagan argues, was an example of two large powers being dragged into a conflict that did not involve their national interests by smaller allies engaged in a regional crisis. Civil strife in distant Epidamnus led to a confrontation between Corcyra—a major independent power—and Corinth, an ally of Sparta. Corcyra could not stand alone against Corinth and sought an alliance with Athens, arguing that Athens could not allow Corcyra's navy—whose 120 ships represented the only other significant peacetime fleet in the Greek world—to fall under the control of a member of the Peloponnesian League.

Corcyran emissaries also argued publicly in Athens that Corinth was really a proxy for Sparta and that Corinthian actions were preliminary maneuvers for a future war between the two alliances. The Corinthians publicly denied the charge and argued that Athens should remain out of the dispute if Athens wanted to avoid war.

Athens was in a difficult position. Although the Athenians did not want a confrontation with a member of the Peleponnesian League, Corinth and its allies—which did not include Sparta—had used their economic strength to build a fleet of more than 100 ships to challenge Corcyra. Therefore, a Corinthian-dominated Corcyra would shift the strategic balance of Aegean naval power in favor of the Peloponnesian League. Because the existing balance of power between the Athenian navy and the Spartan army had been a key factor in maintaining the peace since 445 BC, Athens felt it could not allow the formation of a superior navy without jeopardizing its vital interests.

Athens, unsure of Sparta's potential response to the crisis, adopted a strategy designed to hold Corinthian ambitions in check while trying to keep its actions within the terms of the Thirty-Years' Peace to placate Sparta. The Athenian strategy, formulated by Pericles, was to make a defensive alliance with Corcyra and send a small naval force to join Corcyra's navy as a political deterrent against Corinth. The Athenian leadership, Kagan argues, felt that Sparta would see the move as proper because Corinth had initiated the confrontation. Corcyra was also an independent power free to join either alliance under the terms of the Thirty-Years' Peace.

Corinth—frustrated in its desire to bring Corcyra to heel—asserted that Athens was violating the spirit of the Thirty-Years' Peace and raised the specter of Athenian expansionism in an attempt to influence the domestic debate in Sparta over the crisis. When the Corinthians initiated a naval battle at Sybota despite Athens's warnings, Athens and Corinth stood at the brink of war.

The crisis became more complex as Corinth and Athens maneuvered for advantage. Kagan holds, however, that a settlement could have avoided a general war until Athens made a critical error that forced Sparta to reassesses Athenian motives. Sparta was apprehensive, but, as an imperial power with similar problems, sympathetic to the Athenian argument that its actions were necessary to maintain hegemony inside its alliance. Indeed, Kagan argues, there is evidence that Sparta was putting pressure on its allies to behave because the number of cities actively supporting Corinth decreased from eight to two as the crisis progressed. Corinth's motive in trying to widen the dispute was also transparent, and Sparta resisted being drawn into the crisis despite Corinthian propaganda portraying Sparta as the dupe of a wily Athens.

The critical error came when Athens imposed economic sanctions—the Megarian Decrees—on Megara, one of the two cities to aid Corinth during the crisis at Corcyra. Pericles calculated that the economic sanctions would punish Megara and dissuade others from supporting Corinth without directly attacking Megara, a member of the Peloponnesian League. Megara, however, was strategically located on the isthmus between Athens and Sparta, and the Athenian action could be interpreted as an attempt to bring Megara to heel and secure the approaches to Athens before war with Sparta. Megara had also figured prominently in the outbreak of the first Peloponnesian War and a sense of deja vu began to influence events.

Corinth immediately attacked the Megarian Decree as economic imperialism directed against Sparta and its allies. Sparta could remain aloof to a Corinthian-inspired dispute with Athens, but it could not maintain leadership of the Peloponnesian League for long if it ignored an act of aggression against a member. Sparta sent an emissary to Athens to secure the withdrawal of the Megarian Decree as the price to avoid war. Athens refused to withdraw the decree, and war followed.

Kagan believes the war was avoidable if the political leadership had made a more dispassionate assessment of the political situation. Athenian policy was driven by the need to keep the Peloponnesian League from gaining control of the Corcyran navy. Kagan argues there were no signs that Sparta—which ultimately determined the League's security policy—wanted to challenge Athens's naval power. Indeed, Sparta had worked to keep the crisis localized by refusing to back Corinth until the Megarian Decree raised questions about Athens's real intentions. Sparta allowed the policy of the League to fall hostage to Corinth's regional aspirations.

Both sides fell into a diplomatic game of move and countermove that assumed the other side would see the logic of its position and seek a solution to the crisis short of war. Instead, Sparta and Athens ended up revisiting issues that had already been decided by the previous war. However, as Kagan points out:

> . . . international relations and war are not chess. They often provoke strong emotions that overcome reason and cast intelligence aside.

Political Objectives and Military Strategy

Kagan presents a powerful case that both Athens and Sparta ensured the war would develop into a prolonged stalemate by adopting strategies to prosecute the war based on inaccurate assessments of their opponents' intentions and of their own capabilities. When war broke out, Athens adopted the limited political objective of a return to the status quo ante. Athens also limited its military operations to naval raids throughout the Peloponnese designed to inflict attrition on Sparta and its allies by destroying outlying cities and their garrisons. The leader of Athens, Pericles, based this strategy on information from sources in Sparta that stated that many influential Spartans, including King Archidamus, wanted peace with Athens and had entered the war reluctantly. In Pericles's view, Kagan argues, Sparta would quickly seek to negotiate a peace after Athens demonstrated it had the power to hurt Sparta. Pericles, however, ignored information that the domestic political dynamic in Sparta had changed with the outbreak of war.

On declaring war, Sparta had publicly stated that its political objective was "to liberate Greece." Sparta's political objective could be achieved only by the destruction of the Athenian Empire. Regardless of its

61

information on the prewar debate in Sparta, the Athenian leadership, Kagan argues, should have recognized that Sparta had not set this objective lightly and that Athens needed to be prepared to fight for its very existence. Sparta intended to achieve this objective by sending its army to devastate the countryside of Attica in the belief that the threat of economic ruin would force the Athenian army into the field for destruction by the Spartan army. Then, Sparta would impose a political settlement for a quick victory.

Sparta, however, based its strategy on an assessment of Athenian behavior in the first Peloponnesian War. Sparta failed to consider that agriculture was no longer the basis of Athenian society, and Spartan strategy did not strike at the new heart of Athenian power—the empire and the Athenian navy. Sparta did not know that Athens had anticipated Sparta's actions and that Pericles had won domestic political support for a policy of abandoning the countryside to the Spartan army. But Sparta should have recognized that something was amiss when Athens did not oppose the Spartan invasion and withdrew its forces behind the walls of Athens.

Both sides had made critical errors in formulating strategies to win the ever-elusive "quick" victory. Pericles, however, had designed a strategy to affect Sparta's political calculations based on an outdated understanding of the prewar situation in Sparta. He ignored the information that indicated that the political situation had changed dramatically after the decision for war. Sparta set its strategy based on what had worked in the last war. Sparta's assessment failed to consider how the strategic situation, and Athenian vulnerabilities, had changed in the last 20 years. Athens and Sparta had blundered into the long war they had both hoped to avoid.

The Premature Peace

Kagan argues that Athens squandered an opportunity for a viable negotiated settlement to the war in 421 BC. By 425 BC, Athens recognized that its defensive strategy had led into a strategic cul de sac and Athens began to conduct offensive operations to seize territory in the Peloponnese as bases for sustained operations against Sparta. Athenian forces took Pylos, within 50 miles of Sparta, and the island of Cythera off the south coast of

Laconia. The victory at Pylos also yielded approximately 300 valuable Spartan prisoners whose lives were forfeit if Sparta conducted further operations in Attica. The prisoners represented one-tenth of the Spartan army, and 180 of them were from upper-class families in Sparta. Sparta was not prepared to write these men off, and their capture effectively halted further offensive operations by Sparta. When escaped Spartan slaves began to seek refuge in nearby Pylos soon after its capture, Sparta confronted the specter of a domestic revolution that could shake the foundations of Spartan power.

With Sparta on the defensive, Athens moved against Megara on the isthmus between Attica and the Peloponnese in a bid to end the war. The capture of Megara would bottle up Sparta in the Peloponnese and leave it with no effective way of striking at Athens. Sparta would be forced to negotiate on Athenian terms before the continued pressure from Athenian bases undermined Sparta's alliance and domestic stability. Athens's fortunes, however, waned when the attempt to take Megara failed. Further heavy Athenian losses in the Battle of Delium convinced Athens that the time had come to trade existing advantages for peace.

The inconclusive Peace of Nicias ended the first phase of the Peloponnesian War in 421 BC. The basic provisions of the treaty called for the mutual return of territory and prisoners, with Athens to return Pylos, Cythera, and the Spartan prisoners from Sphacteria. Athens's primary objective was the return of Amphipolis that had risen in revolt against Athens. Now allied with Sparta, Athens had to regain Amphipolis to secure the critical shipping route to the Black Sea. Amphipolis, however, refused to honor the terms of the treaty with the support of the Spartan governor, Clearidas. Several Spartan allies, including Thebes and Corinth, still hoped for the destruction of Athenian power and refused to swear oaths to respect the treaty.

The Athenians, according to Kagan, failed to appreciate that they held the strategic advantage and had enough political leverage over Sparta to force a favorable settlement. Athens should not have squandered its position until Sparta faithfully executed the treaty. Otherwise, Athens should have sought some change in the strategic

situation to replace the advantages it negotiated away. Sparta could not risk major operations against Athens provided Athens continued to hold the Spartan prisoners and the bases in the Peloponnese. The war would still be uncomfortable and costly, but Sparta could not win without some significant change in the strategic situation.

Nevertheless, Athens accepted the treaty and returned the prisoners while retaining Pylos as a bargaining chip to secure the return of Amphipolis. In Kagan's view, the Athenian leadership allowed recent reverses, reinforced by the war weariness in Athens, to pressure it into accepting a treaty that it should have rejected. The actions of Thebes and Corinth showed that some of the smaller powers wanted the war to continue, and the position taken by Clearidas at Amphipolis raised questions about either Spartan good faith or its ability to enforce its wishes against internal opposition. As a result, the only substantive result of the treaty was to give Sparta a breathing space to recover while creating new sources of friction. By 418 BC, Sparta and Athens clashed again at the Battle of Mantinea, and full-scale war had resumed by 413 BC.

Political Assessment and Intelligence

The blunders of the Greek leadership highlight the dangers involved whenever political leaders act as their own intelligence officers. The Greek leaders on both sides were intelligent, skilled, and experienced. They were intimately familiar with their opponents and, not unnaturally, thought they understood their opponents' political, economic, and military positions. They formulated policies that they judged to have a good chance of success. Once implemented, however, the political leadership tended to resist making changes that suggested some fundamental flaw in its original policy.

The Greek leadership had made repeated mistakes in the runup to war and, when war finally broke out, it defined political and military objectives inadequate to resolve the underlying dispute. The Greek leaders on both sides needed a Calchas, a seer of misery, to present an assessment of the factors affecting their opponents and the likely outcome of holding to the current course of action. Lacking an independent view, the political leaders found it difficult to assess objectively the conse-

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Political Intrigue in the Peloponnesian War

Covert political operations were an important component of strategy during the war. Significant Greek cities were normally walled and could withstand lengthy sieges. As a rule, the best way to take a city was to find an ally inside willing to switch alliances in return for domestic political advantage or pay. Seeking political allies in each other's camp, the Spartans frequently approached oligarchs in the Athenian Empire while the Athenians sought to bolster democratic factions in the Peloponnesian League. Both supported rebellious members of the opposing alliance with little regard for their political convictions. Athens's unsuccessful attempt to take Megara was triggered by an offer from the city's democrats to change alliances provided Athenian forces would lay siege to the city.

Covert operations sometimes generated unpleasant domestic political consequences. The Athenians, disaffected with the progress of the war, deposed Pericles from office in 430 BC and brought him to trial on a charge of embezzlement. At his trial, Pericles defended himself by saying he had spent the funds "for a necessary purpose" which ancient sources say probably involved bribing foreigners in the interest of the state. Pericles lost the case.

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quences of their actions and make needed changes in strategy. The information was readily available to the leaders on both sides, but it was not examined in any systematic way.

The tragic outcome of the Peloponnesian War, Kagan argues, was not inevitable and was not the result of historical forces beyond the control of the Greek leadership; *it was the consequence of miscalculation.* The modern intelligence officer, like the strategist, should study the war's lessons. As Thucydides admonished, such events might "happen again, in all probability, in the same or a similar way."

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